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7-1-1942

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# NEGRO EDUCATION AND THE PRESENT CRISIS

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By  
MORDECAI W. JOHNSON



Reprinted from "The Educational Record" for July 1942

The American Council on Education  
744 Jackson Place, N. W.  
Washington, D. C.

# Negro Education and the Present Crisis

By MORDECAI W. JOHNSON

TODAY the United States of America is entering a period of maximum strain. This period of strain will increase in intensity until it puts to the test all of our national resources to the utmost degree. We shall need every ounce of intelligent man power that we have—in the army, in the production industries, and in civilian organization. We shall need the maximum energies of all of our people, such as grow out of deep conviction about the worthwhileness of our cause. We shall need a remarkably strong functioning unity on the part of all of our people, because we recognize that the war is on two fronts: the effort is not only to defeat us in the field, but to break our unity and to possess us from within. And we shall need the maximum prestige power to hold the friendships which we have accumulated in the world, including many millions of men of the yellow and brown and black races.

In this situation, the one-tenth of our population which is Negro comes to have a very great significance. In the first place, they constitute a tenth of our man power at home, in a situation in which it is difficult to increase our home man power. It is very important, therefore, to look realistically at the way they have been educated and are being educated, so as to appraise all of the assets and liabilities which we may have for this great struggle.

It is gratifying to observe that some facts do appear there which are going to be great assets to us in this struggle. One of them is that in this field where the children of slaves have been educated and where for many years there prevailed a low estimate of their personalities, we have had seventy-five years of the voluntary devotion of the lives of some of the finest elements of the majority. In nearly every former slave state many of the ablest men and women of the majority race

have spent their lives, even unto death, in uttermost devotion to the education of the children of the slaves. Nowhere else in the world has there been so substantial an evidence in one place of the faith of the finest elements of a nation in the sacred and inviolable worth of the human individual as such.

In the second place, during this period we have had a completely satisfactory demonstration of the high intellectual and spiritual capacities of the Negro people. The career which we have before us, therefore, in dealing with peoples normally grouped as subject races need not be hurt by any lack of confidence on our part in the capacity of these people for intelligent and self-respecting constructiveness.

This asset is in large part due to the remarkable cooperation which the American universities, the great universities, like Harvard, Yale, the University of Chicago, Columbia University, and others have given to the devoted people who have worked in the South, in receiving their students and in furthering their education under the very best possible circumstances. At Harvard, at Yale, at Columbia, at Chicago, and elsewhere we have had unmistakable evidence of the high caliber of the Negro mind. As a great history professor at Harvard said the other day—a man over eighty years of age:

I have now had more than forty years of experience in the classroom. During those years I have taught white men and Negroes, Japanese and Chinese, and I have taught enough Negroes who come, as men say, from the least advanced stratum of human life on earth, to know that there is no such thing as a white mind or a Negro mind. There is the human mind, and when it is dealt with intelligently, without condescension and in faith, in all of its areas, it is capable of rising to meet our expectations.

In the third place, we have had here in America a demonstration of the capacity of Negro people to assume heavy responsibility as leaders and to carry that responsibility under extremely difficult circumstances. We need look nowhere further, I think, than the educational system itself to see this; for Negroes have not only come up, through, and out of every division of our educational system, but in so far as they have

had the money to experiment they have reproduced every element of that educational system and have had it accredited by our best American accrediting associations.

In the next place, we are fortunate in having had, through the great emphatic life of Booker T. Washington, some considerable attention given among this humble people to the question of realistic readiness to handle affairs in agriculture and the various fields of trade and mechanics. And, as a result of the Negro's performance during the shortage of labor incident to the last war, we have now no doubt of his capacity to do skilled and semiskilled as well as unskilled labor, in our most intricate industrial processes.

All of these are substantial elements of confidence, both within and without. But they lie primarily in the qualitative field and give us that satisfaction which comes from the contemplation of progress. The situation which we are in now, however, requires that we do not be satisfied with these emotions. We must examine the fruits of this educational system for Negroes, this segregated educational system—because six-sevenths of the Negroes of the United States are being educated in a segregated system of education—we must needs examine that system as to its quantitative and qualitative adequacy to produce the intelligent man power which this nation needs in a time of maximum strain.

It is very fortunate that we are in a position to make this examination through the eyes of objective observers of such high caliber as the National Advisory Committee on Education, which has made its survey and report within the last two or three years. What we see there is serious.

It may be good just to look at what this committee saw. Briefly, it saw within the segregated school system for Negroes a school population of 2,904,000 persons of from 5 to 17 years of age, of whom 869,000 were of high school age. They saw in addition 827,000 persons in the college and professional age group of 18 to 21—a total school population of 3,731,939 Negro children and youth.

Now, the first fact that will meet our attention in that sur-

vey is that at least a million of these children and youth have not been to school at all. That million runs up to a possible maximum of 1,750,000 children and youth who have been to school either not at all, or so intermittently as scarcely to count.

In the second place, we see that on the primary and secondary level the Negro children and youth have been subjected to a type of education for which there is no other word than miserable. I think perhaps the best index to the extent of its miserableness is indicated by the per capita expenditure. As you know, the average per capita expenditure in primary and secondary education for the United States as a whole is around \$75. There are about 17 states that go up above \$100 per capita, and there are some states that go up as high as \$138 per capita. Now, the per capita expenditure on Negro children throughout the southern states, under the most favorable aspect of the matter that can possibly be had, is \$20 per capita. But I say the most favorable because if you look at ten states in which the vast majority of them are being educated, you will find that the per capita expenditure is around \$13 per child. But if you look at the five states in which 1,125,000, or approximately half of these children are being educated, you will see an actual expenditure per child of only \$7.60! These people whom we are going to rely upon now to give us their full share of man power, intelligent man power, have had in these five states which I now look at \$7.60 worth of training each, as over against \$75 for the nation, and as over against \$100 for seventeen states, as over against \$138 for the highest states. That is, we are now expecting this one-tenth of our population to have such inherent genius as to meet the terrible strain of this period with an education which at best is about one-tenth as good as our average.

Take a look at the teachers' salaries in, let us say, four states—Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, and Mississippi—where there are a million Negro school children. They reach the average figure of \$295 a year, as over against an average of \$1,283 a year for the nation.

Take a look at the schoolhouses and equipment. The average expenditure per capita in this area for schoolhouses and equipment is \$36 per Negro child, as over against an average of \$256 for the nation.

There is but one word for these figures. We have been giving this one-tenth of our man power a miserably neglected education.

Now, if we take a look at how they have gotten along in this system, we find certain startling figures that are very significant for us: 74 per cent of all the Negro children in the public schools leave the system before they reach the fifth grade; and only 45,000 are found in the eighth grade. That is, only 14 out of every 100 who started on the educational journey ever get as far as the eighth grade.

Now take a brief look at the secondary system of education. We are in a position to be very happy that we have increased our secondary educational facilities for Negroes in the last ten years by about tenfold. But where have we arrived after this tenfold increase? Out of 869,000 young Negroes of high school age, we have 163,000 in high school—19 out of a hundred as over against an average of from 60 to 64 out of every hundred for the nation. There are still over 400 counties in this area in which there is no four-year high school.

In these counties alone 356,000 Negro youth—more than one-third of all the Negro youth of high school age in the area—are entirely cut off from four-year high school opportunity.

And what of those who are in high school? Of the 163,000 only about 22,000 come to graduation. That is, they have the external marks of graduation. Only God knows what the content of their graduation means, because these schools receive the miserable financial support already indicated, and every psychological examination that we have given their graduates over a wide area in the last few years gives evidence of abnormally large numbers falling heavily below the national mean.

Now, in the field of higher education, where there is preparation for leadership, we have approximately 40,000 Negroes in college out of a total of 12,000,000 Negroes in the United States. The segregated colleges which they attend are, on the whole, poorly supported with funds and are substantially crippled in all of the elements of first-grade instruction. In the entire area there is not a single engineering school that would be accredited by the national accrediting agency. When the United States Office of Education received \$9,000,000 recently for speeding up engineering education, it could not find a single accredited engineering school in the entire southern area in which a Negro could take the work.

There is not a single state-supported school of medicine in the entire southern area where 9,000,000 Negroes live. Fortunately, there are two that have been organized under private auspices and maintained under enormous difficulty over a period of years. The federal government has at last begun to give thoughtful, though still inadequate, support to one of those.

It would be interesting to take a good look at one state in the field of higher education for Negroes. Take the state of Alabama, for example. The entire amount of money spent by the state and federal governments for the higher education of Negroes in the state of Alabama amounts to less than the student fees paid by the Negro students in a single normal school in the state.

Now, it is clear as to what all this means, with regard to the present crisis. It means, in the first place, that the Negroes are going to furnish a disproportionately large percentage of persons who cannot be relied upon to do anything substantially resourceful, because they are illiterate. Between May 15 and September 1941, the army disqualified 143,000 men who had been drawn by the selective service because they did not meet the minimum intelligence rating of a fourth-grade student. Of that 143,000, 58,000 were Negroes. From Georgia alone, 14,000 were disqualified; 11,000 from



Louisiana; 11,000 from South Carolina. From the great state of Maryland 12.8 per cent of all registrants were disqualified, 16 per cent from Virginia, 17 per cent from Florida, 19.9 per cent from Georgia, 21.4 from South Carolina, and 21.5 from Mississippi. These astonishing percentages of men were turned down by the army because they did not have the minimum training required to start drilling for the kind of war that faces the nation.

These facts mean, further, that the Negro tenth of the population is going to furnish, by necessity, hardly a third of its quota of skilled labor. You would think, from the enthusiastic reception that we gave to Booker T. Washington in this country, that by all means the training of Negroes in vocational work, such as agriculture, home economics, trades, mechanics, and so forth, would rate very high as to quantity and quality. Well, when you examine the educational system, you will find that although Negroes in the segregated area constitute 21 per cent of the total population, they constitute only 16 per cent of those who are enrolled in the vocational courses that are supported by the federal government itself with heavy appropriations. In the second place, you will find that labor unions and public bodies in these states have actually started campaigns against Negroes taking these courses. This, among other things, has already had the effect of cutting down the use of federal funds for the vocational education of Negroes to less than 50 per cent of the money actually due them from moneys appropriated by the federal government for this purpose.

The Negroes, then, are going to furnish hardly one-third of their quota of skilled labor. They are going to furnish hardly a fourth of their quota of men with the external marks of leadership. I say "external marks," because many who have earned the college degree will have received but very little content from the poorly supported institutions whence they come. There will be a negligible number of engineers, and in the entire area we have not yet a single instrumentality

which is adequately fit to train them, even if we should decide now that we want to do it.

The number of Negroes studying medicine is now so small that there are not enough graduates annually to provide for the existing Negro hospitals, and the hospital movement among Negroes is itself in its infancy. If we begin to take from the small number of Negro physicians now in practice enough physicians to give decent care to the Negroes in the army, we shall break down the existing health services for Negroes in civilian life, which are already so poor as to constitute a substantial menace to the health of the people.

Now these are some realistic facts which are hard to look at. There can be no doubt of the judgment—cold, practical, and without sentiment: we have been and are educating the Negro people in a way which has greatly weakened the national service capacity of a tenth of our man power and with results which, in this crisis, are a certain liability, if not a distressing danger to the very survival of this republic.

Let us turn now to the question of morale. The Negro has fought in every war we have had. There are two things about him that have been characteristic. Whenever he has fought, he has fought with all his might. Moreover, he has not only done all the shooting necessary, but he has contributed about 200 per cent of his quota of morale. How would you feel if, after your fathers had fought in every war from the beginning until now, you found yourself called upon to fight in another war requiring trained intelligence as never before, with your own powers weakened and crippled by grossly inferior educational opportunity—so miserably educated as to be comparatively powerless to do what you desire to do with all your heart?

The Negro is now obliged to go through the humiliating experience of going into the army overwhelmingly to do the menial tasks, deprived almost *en masse* of the privilege of doing the things of skill, not because he has been subjected to a system of education in which he had full opportunity to get

his powers ready and has failed, but because he has never had anything approaching an adequate opportunity to have his powers exposed and developed. There is no greater attack upon any man's morale than that which comes from such a realization. In this time of crisis such a realization has come and it has been staggering.

You will not be surprised, therefore, to find that the morale of the Negro people is now very low. It is the lowest in my memory—and I am 52 years of age. It is tragically low.

Still another experience has been greatly distressing to the Negro people. In the development of the war thus far, it has been found that neither the fighting forces of the nation nor the industrial productive forces appear to want the intelligence, the little body of intelligence that the Negro people have developed. The navy has committed itself to a policy of Negroes for mess boys only. Any competence that the Negro has, beyond the use of his hands and feet, to them is irrelevant. They have recently made an announcement to them, in a most victorious tone, that they are willing to expand the menial occupations of the Negro in the navy to include a wider extent: now they will not only let him wash dishes and polish boots, but he can do the dirty work connected with the establishment of naval stations, and he may work up to the place where they will let him take a little tug-boat out to the three-mile limit. But they notify him in advance—with the endorsement of our national leaders—that he may not expect to be an officer.

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EDITOR'S NOTE. President Johnson delivered this address on May 1, 1942. Since June 1, 1942 the United States Navy has enlisted Negroes. Navy facilities are expected to accommodate 1,000 newly enlisted Negroes each month. Those accepted for general service will receive eight weeks of recruit training at Great Lakes Naval Training Station, and some will be selected for a sixteen-week course at Hampton Institute to undergo training as electricians, carpenters, shipfitters, machinists, metalsmiths, firemen, and cooks. Other training schools for Negro enlisted men will include a sixteen-week course to become gunners, quartermasters, yeomen, storekeepers, and cooks; a sixteen-week course to become radiomen and signalmen; and a four-week course to become

The air corps is carrying on a splendid token effort to include enough Negroes to get credit for including them. It has a single place where it is taking Negroes, but it is taking them so slowly that there are 2,000 qualified Negroes now waiting at the door to put their feet on the ground and begin training. But the air corps leaders have not taken them. Do they want them?

In the last war, the Negro had to force himself into positions of leadership by a campaign to get an officers' training camp, and in spite of the magnificent showing which he made in that war, and also more recently in the Civilian Conservation Corps, by which the army gave a previous indication of its attitude, the army leadership paid hardly any attention whatsoever to the leadership capacities of young Negroes, and made no effort to develop them. To such an extent was this true that they had to be roundly and vigorously criticized by the American Youth Commission.

Both Annapolis and West Point are substantially closed—Annapolis altogether and West Point with just a token presence of two or three Negroes. And if you would ask any Negro college president in America today whether he feels any pull on his college for leadership, from the army, he would tell you there is substantially none.

Does that mean, then, that the leaders of the navy, the air corps, and the army are content to have had this segregated system of education produce such an inferior product,

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armed guards. Some qualified Negroes will be enlisted for duty in construction activities at the Naval Training Station at Norfolk, Virginia.

Applicants with musical talents will be selected for four weeks of duty at Great Lakes Naval Training Station, after which some will be assigned to bands attached to several naval stations, including certain naval air stations and pre-flight training schools.

The Marine Corps is enlisting during June and July its first battalion of Negroes. This will be a composite unit including infantry, tanks, artillery, anti-aircraft guns, and machine guns, numbering about 900 men in all. It will include some places for skilled radio operators, electricians, accountants, carpenters, draftsmen, band musicians, riggers, and blacksmiths. The training center will be near New River, N. C.

on the ground that they don't need the Negro's tenth contribution, up to the height of his intellectual powers, anyway? Is it the conception of our armed forces that we want out of the Negroes merely a group of *native* troops, like the Malaysians and the Burmese, who are to be given a minimum amount of intelligence and led to battle under the leadership of white men, their bodies prostituted for a liberty in which they are not expected to share?

If there could be one compensation to the Negro people for all the intellectual impoverishment which has grown out of the segregated system of education, it would be to have the doors of the ladder of leadership open to them on the basis of their ability as individuals, letting them have at least such leadership as they qualify objectively to have.

I am sure of one thing. The Japanese think that we meant the Negro educational system to be inferior, and we meant the Negroes to be native troops, and they are telling the Indians that, and telling the Chinese that, and telling them that all of this stuff that we are speaking about equality and the sacred and inviolable worth of the individual is simply propaganda, that all the Indians and the Chinese and the Africans and the Malaysians need to do is to look at this educational system, look at the way the Negro is treated by the navy and the army and the air corps and by the industrial leaders of this nation, to see that even in this moment when they are fighting a war involving the very existence of democracy, they are determined not to yield on this question of race. "And," say the Japanese, "they do not intend to yield. They have no intention of fighting for your liberty. They have not said that they will. They have not put it in their war aims, and they do not intend to. And even if they do so," say the Japanese, "would you listen to their words, in the face of these facts?"

Is this true? I ask you today, in this solemn moment of history which constitutes the dividing line between what America was and what she may become, is this true? Do the facts

which I have laid before you represent the *intent* of America, the *purpose* of America?

It seems clear to me that our answer must be "No." We have made a great mistake. We did not know that in our dealing with the Negro in this fashion we were building up such a liability for ourselves. Mr. Hitler knows that liability, and he is busy now in this nation taking advantage of it. He assumes that this situation represents a substantial amount of will among us, and that this amount of will is so substantial that if he could bring it out into the open it would make an effective split in our functioning unity. So he is busy today, if you but read your papers, arousing antagonism to the Negro. In the last three or four months, in the city of Washington, in the very government offices, there have been organized movements to convince federal workers that it is an unsufferable indignity to eat in the same dining room with a Negro who is working for the same purpose. Great groups of people have gathered together in cities like Detroit to prevent Negroes from occupying houses which were built for them out of federal moneys appropriated for that purpose.

Are these just accidental flurries? Or do they represent the sure procedure of a divisive enemy working within our midst to fan into a flame the one emotion which he believes is capable of splitting us asunder?

I think there is only one conclusion to make. This system of education which we have developed for Negroes, with the consequences connected with it, must be changed. It is insufferable not merely for the Negro, but from the point of view of the self-defense of this nation.

But now let us get rid of all the illusions which we have had about it. We cannot leave it to the religious denominations and to the philanthropists to bring about the change that is needful. Their work has been very great and is great today. But all the work of the religious denominations and the philanthropists does not touch effectively more than 5,000 high school students and 17,000 college students. Thus far the entire annual expenditure which they are making in the

field of Negro education would not approximate the budget of the single institution which we call the University of the State of Louisiana.

No, this is not a work of philanthropy. It is a work of objective, realistic, self-saving necessity. A nation which must go through the strain that we are now going through—not only now, but perhaps for the next four, five, ten, twenty, or thirty years—must have for every human being who is in it the maximum amount of educational expenditure and care that we can spare to bring out the maximum of his intellectual powers and the maximum development of his competencies. And if wisdom can be heard, such a nation must see to it that the armed forces and the industrial forces of the country actually use those resources to the maximum degree.

The other day the Federal Bureau of Investigation came to see me about one of our teachers, questioning his patriotism because he had attended a certain meeting. I raise here a question which is far more serious than that: I raise the question of the patriotism of those who, in a grave national crisis, refuse to use the intelligence and strength available from a tenth of the nation's man power because of the color of their skin.

And may I say this final paragraph? Please do not interpret me as having made this speech in order to make either a direct or oblique blow at the southern states. Ten years ago I might have done that. But no man can see clearly what I see today unless he understands that the background of the impoverished educational conditions which prevail in the South for Negroes is not merely an act of the will on the part of the southern people who desire to take advantage of the Negro. For they, too, at this moment in our struggle, must bear their share of responsibility after having received an education for their children from an expenditure little more than half of the average expenditure for the rest of the country. What we have here is a group of people whose economic and political system was broken up by the Civil War and the slave system, but who have never recovered sufficient strength

to operate a first-class system of education on anything like a per capita expenditure approximating the best in the country. And, finding their own sons and daughters almost 100 per cent behind the rest of the country, when they have looked upon the necessity of dividing the little that they have with the Negroes who were but yesterday slaves, they have succumbed to temptation in their weakness and have taken from them what they should have given. But we shall not see clearly unless we see that they are themselves bearing a burden which is heavier than they can bear, and which this nation has no right to leave them alone in bearing. We shall never do our duty as a nation until we do what, in this hour, we clearly see to do—appropriate from the federal treasury, by the consent and thoughtful and deliberate will of all the states, sufficient moneys to enable this struggling people to establish a first-class system of education for themselves and for the Negro population, and to bring the Negro into a grateful unity with this nation, because at last he has found a chance to emancipate his powers.

I have no doubt how we are going to answer this question. We are going to do this. We are going to do it, because we cannot be satisfied with winning this war. We can be satisfied with no less than being the leader of the forces of freedom in this world. And we are going to treat the Negro in this war, before we get through, and after this war, in such a way that the people of India and the people of China and the people of the Indies and the people of Africa will have no doubt that we mean what we say when we say we believe in the sacred and inviolable worth of the human individual as such, and we intend to set free every group of human beings with whom we have anything to do.